DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 816 PS 020 422

AUTHOR St. Peters, Michelle; And Others
TITLE Media Use among Preschool Children as a Function of Income and Media Options.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Asian Americans; Blacks; Cable Television; Day Care; Educational Background; Ethnicity; Family Characteristics; *Family Income; *Family Structure; Interviews; Mass Media Role; *Mass Media Use; Parents; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Socioeconomic Status; *Television Viewing; Videotape Cassettes; Videotape Recorders; Whites
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Media Ownership; Native Americans

ABSTRACT

This study examined television viewing patterns among 89 children of 2 and 4 years of age and their families. The purpose was to describe television and VCR viewing patterns among young children as a function of family characteristics and media options in the home. Information about family structure, income, media availability, child care arrangements, and other family characteristics was obtained through parent and child interviews. Parents were interviewed in person and by telephone about their child's television viewing for the previous day on at least three different occasions. Weekly viewing hours were calculated from the interview data. Programs were classified as child informative, child entertainment, or adult programs. There were no differences in the total amount of viewing as a function of media availability. However, media options made a difference in the types of programs children watched. Children who had VCRs or cable subscription watched twice as much child entertainment programming and less adult programming than did children without these options. Children who attended day care watched television about seven hours a week less than did other children. Total weekly viewing was higher for children from low-income or single-parent households than for children from high-income and two-parent families. Three tables and six figures are attached. (Contains 15 references.) (GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED357816

Media Use Among Preschool Children as a Function of Income and Media Options

Michelle St. Peters, Sabrina Oppenheimer,
Darwin J. Eakins, John C. Wright, and Aletha C. Huston

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Presented at the biennial meeting of
The Society for Research in Child Development
April 1991, Seattle, Washington

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michelle St. Peters

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This research was supported by a grant from the Children's Televsion Workshop to Aletha C. Huston and John C. Wright. Requests for reprints can be sent to Michelle St. Peters, Department of Human Development, 4001 Dole Hall, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045

PS 020122

Abstract

A sample of 89 2- and 4-year olds and their families participated in a study of television viewing patterns. The sample was 71% Caucasian; 29% of the children were African-American or Native American. Sixty-eight families had both parents living in the home. Annual income was adjusted for family size; 83% of the families earned less than $20,000 per year. Eighty-three percent of the families owned a VCR, 67% received basic cable, and 20% received pay cable. Only 8% of the sample had a TV set with no other media options. Parents were interviewed in person and by telephone about their child's TV viewing for the previous day on at least three different occasions. Weekly viewing hours were calculated from these diaries. Programs were classified as: child informative, child entertainment, and adult programs. Children's viewing time averaged 24 hours per week; 83% of this viewing was from broadcast TV and 17% was VCR viewing. There were no differences in total amount of viewing as a function of media availability. However, media ownership did make a difference in the types of programs viewed. Children who had VCRs or cable subscription watched twice as much child entertainment programming and less adult programming than children without these options. Children who attended a childcare facility watched TV approximately 7 hours less than children who stayed at home. Total weekly viewing was higher for children from low-income or single-parent households than those from higher income and two-parent families.

Children's television viewing occurs in an ecological context created by the family structure and environment; sociocultural factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure; and the media options available to them (Anderson & Bryant, 1983). One of the major changes in the last decade has been the expansion of media options in many American households by multi-channel cable TV and videorecorders (VCRs). Nielsen (1990) estimated that 69% of households own VCRs, 58.6% subscribe to basic cable and 29.2% to pay cable. Initially, households adopting these media options were primarily middle-class, two-parent families with multiple children (Condry, 1989; Gunter & Svennevig, 1987). Children with these TV options generally watch more hours and different types of programming than those without them (Comstock, 1989). In one investigation, young children whose families subscribed to cable watched more cartoons and less child informative programming than those without cable (Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, & St. Peters, 1990). Wartella, Heintz, Aidman, and Mazzarella (1990) found that young children from affluent families watched three more hours per week if they had cable than if they did not. Families who pay for "movie" channels watch an average of 10 hours per week more than those who do not (Condry, 1989). When that channel is Disney, children show dramatic increases in viewing the child entertainment programming that is provided by that channel (Huston et al., 1990).

Children in VCR households watch more television than those without (Comstock, 1989), perhaps because VCR enables them to watch programs that otherwise would not be watched either due to

schedule conflicts or because they are only available on videocassettes (Gunter & Svennevig, 1982).

Average viewing also varies as a function of income, education, and socioeconomic status. People with low incomes, education, and occupational status watch more television than their counterparts. Larger families watch more television than smaller ones (Nielsen, 1989; Sarlo, Jason, & Lonack, 1988); and children of single parents watch more than those with both parents (Brown, Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990) especially on weekends (Medrich, Roizen, Rubin, & Buckley, 1982). Family structure also influences what is viewed and with whom. Younger children mostly watch television with their parents or siblings, and often older family members select the programs viewed (Gunter & Svennevig, 1987).

One explanation for these findings is the default hypothesis: television viewing is the default when people are at home and other attractive activities are unavailable or limited (Comstock, 1989). Parents who work long hours need time for themselves either to relax or to do chores. Low income parents may not be able to provide their children with costly alternative activities. Television may also be a solution to unsafe neighborhoods or other hazards in low income neighborhoods. Medrich et al. (1982) reported that older children from poor families were often put in charge of their younger siblings, and television was used to keep the younger ones safely entertained at home. For them, television provided a safe, cheap and effortless source of entertainment.

Children's viewing can be modified by boundaries resulting from family, school, and broadcast schedules. Preschool children who attend child care watch fewer child informative programs (which are broadcast during weekdays) than those who are cared for by mothers at home full time (Pinon, Huston, & Wright, 1989). Grade-school children watch about three hours a week less than younger ones (Nielsen, 1989), probably due to their school attendance. Children whose parents are employed are likely to attend day-care or after-school care, thus limiting their viewing time (Medrich et al., 1982).

Finally, children's program preferences are often age-determined. Preschoolers are attracted to cartoons; older children prefer comedies and action adventure programs; adolescents prefer more serious drama (Watkins, 1985). Decisions on what to view usually follow the status hierarchy of the family members: parents prevail over children, and older siblings prevail over younger ones (Comstock, 1989). As a result, young children with older siblings not only watch more television than single children, but also typically watch more programs that are above their comprehension level. Conversely, children with younger siblings watch more programming designed for children at or below their age level (Pinon et al., 1989).

The purpose of this study was to describe television and and VCR viewing patterns among very young children as a function of family characteristics and media options available in the home. This study is part of a 3-year longitudinal investigation of television viewing among 240 families living in Kansas City, MO and Lawrence, KS.

Method

Sample

This sample consisted of 89 children and their families selected from the total sample using the criteria that English was their first language, and at least three separate and complete measures of viewing had been collected for them at the time of analysis. They were 2 (N=42) or 4 (N=47) years old at the beginning of the study. There were 40 girls and 49 boys. The sample was 71% Caucasion; 29% were African-American, Native American or Asian American. All but 21 families had both parents living in the home at the beginning of the study.

To group families for analysis family, annual incomes were adjusted for the number of people in the family, using the corrections that are used to calculate national poverty levels (Congressional Budget Office, 1988). The participants were grouped into three income categories: 1) adjusted incomes less than $10,000 (N=37), 2) adjusted incomes between $10,000 and $20,000 (N=37), and 3) adjusted incomes over $20,000 (N=15).

Eighty-three percent of the families owned a VCR, 67% received basic cable, and 20% received pay cable. Only 8% of the sample had a television set with no other media options.

Procedure and Measurement

Information about family structure, income, media availability, child care arrangements and other family characteristics were obtained during an interview with the parent and child. On subsequent occasions during the next several months, parents were interviewed in person and by telephone about

their child's activities for the previous day. Children's activities and television viewing were recorded in a time use diary adapted from procedures used extensively in earlier investigations (Juster & Stafford, 1985). Child care providers were also contacted and asked to report children's daily schedules. Only those who had completed three or more diaries at the time of the analysis were included. The number of diary days represented ranged from 3 to 11.

Children's viewing was assessed by the number of hours they were present while the set was on during the daily diaries. Programs were classified as: 1) child informative, (e.g., Sesame Street), 2) child entertainment, (e.g., cartoons), 3) adult programs, (e.g., sports, news, drama, action-adventure, and game shows), and 4) unclassified, (the parent did not know the type of program the child viewed.

Results

Children's total viewing averaged 24 hours per week. Eighty-three percent of this viewing was from broadcast television and 17% was VCR viewing (See Figure 1). Children watched broadcast TV for an average of 20 hours per week; almost half of this viewing was composed of adult programs. Children viewed on the average 4 hours per week on VCRs and over 2/3 of this time was devoted to child entertainment programs. The distribution of hours spent viewing different types of programs on broadcast television and VCRs is shown in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Viewing as a function of media options

Children whose families owned VCRS watched about the same total amount of television as those without a VCR at home. However, media ownership did make a difference in the types of programs viewed. Viewing hours for the two groups are shown in Figure 3. Children who had VCRs watched twice as much child entertainment programming on TV and on their VCRs as children who did not have this media option. Children in homes without VCRs watched more adult programs on TV than those who had VCRs. That is, VCR viewing replaced some of the viewing time that might otherwise have been devoted to broadcast television, and the programming viewed was more appropriate to a child audience.

Similarly, children with cable watched about the same amount of television and those without, but those with cable watched 2.5 hours more of child entertainment and 2 hours less of adult programs than those without cable. These relationships are shown in Figure 4.

Viewing as a function of family income

Total weekly viewing for children in the lowest income group was greater than for those in higher income groups: 29 hours for low income; 22.5 hours for middle income; 15 hours for the highest income group. There were no major differences among income groups in VCR viewing patterns, but there were differences in the types of programs viewed on broadcast television. The major differences among income groups were accounted for by adult programs; children in the lowest income group watched 5 hours more then middle income children, and 10 hours more than children

in the highest income group (See Table 2 and Figure 5).

Mother's education was also negatively related to viewing. Children with highly educated mothers watched less TV in general, watched fewer adult programs, less child entertainment, and more child informative programs than children whose mothers were less educated.

Income and media availability were interrelated as predictors of viewing. For example, the heaviest viewers were children from the lowest income group whose families owned a VCR (30 hours per week) or subscribed to cable (29.2 hours per week). The next heaviest viewers were children in the lowest income group whose families did not own a VCR (26.4 hours per week) or did not subscribe to cable (28.6 hours per week). All children in the highest income group had VCRs available in their homes. Among children in this group, the lightest viewers were those without cable subscription, averaging 8 hours of weekly viewing.

Family Structure

The majority of children living in single-parent families had lower incomes and fewer media options than those living in two-parent families. Living in a single-parent family was positively related to children's total TV viewing (r=.19, $p<.05$); they viewed more adult programs (r=.19, $p<.05$) and they watched fewer child informative programs (r=.18, $p<.05$).

Family size was related to the amount of viewing; children in larger families watched more broadcast TV (r=.16, $p<.10$), specifically more child entertainment programs (r=.21, $p<.05$) than children in smaller families. Children who had younger siblings watched more child informative programs on broadcast TV

than children without younger siblings (r=.26, $p<.05$). Conversely, children with older siblings watched less child informative programming on TV (r=-.20, $p<.05$) than those who did not have older siblings.

Type of Childcare

Children in different childcare settings have different opportunities for viewing. In this sample, 29 children did not attend a childcare facility; the majority of these were 2-year-olds (72%). Fifteen children were in family childcare outside their own homes; 2/3 of these were 2-year-olds. The remaining 45 children attended a childcare center; the majority of these children (76%) were 4-year-olds.

Children who did not have care outside their own homes watched approximately 7 hours more than those children who attended a childcare facility. The differences occurred for several types of programs. The means appear in Table 3 and Figure 6.

Age Differences in Viewing

In general, 2-year-olds viewed 3 hours more per week than 4-year-olds (see Table 1). There were no discernable differences among age groups in total weekly viewing of VCR programs. However, 2-year-olds spent a little more time watching child informative programs on broadcast TV and 2 hours more per week being exposed to adult programs than 4-year-olds. Older children watched approximately an hour more of child entertainment programs on broadcast TV than the younger children.

These discrepancies in viewing patterns may be accounted for

by daily routines as well as developmental differences. The majority of 2-year-olds did not attend child care and were at home when most child informative programs are available for viewing. Also many mothers reported that their young children were present during daytime adult entertainment programs (soap operas, talk shows, game shows). Because approximately 2/3 of the 4-year-olds attended childcare centers, they had less opportunity to view daytime programs. Their viewing of child entertainment programs could be a function of greater independence in program choice and the paucity of child informative programs broadcast after school.

Discussion

Even though this sample was below the national average on income, the saturation of VCR ownership and cable subscription was higher than the national estimates. Perhaps this is because these options have become more affordable. Of those who did own a VCR, 70% also subscribed to cable TV.

Contrary to expectations, having more media options did not lead to greater time with the media. This finding contradicts earlier reports. One reason may be that the novelty of VCRs and cable has passed. With the introduction of new media, there is often an initial surge of interest and viewing; once the medium has been in the home for some time, viewing returns to its more typical pattern. A second reason is suggested by the default hypothesis: children's television viewing time is a function of the time left from other activities; that time does not change with added media options. These children are also younger than

those described in earlier studies; they may have less freedom to initiate viewing. At the same time, the measure of viewing in this study is more precise than most surveys and may reflect viewing more accurately.

Media options did make a difference in the types of program children watched. Children who had access to VCRs and cable television watched more child entertainment programs and fewer adult programs than children without those media options. Unfortunately, having more options did not increase the viewing of child informative programs; only 5.5% of children's total viewing was devoted to viewing child informative programs.

When children watched VCRs, they usually watched child entertainment programming. This pattern probably reflects both viewing preferences (parents' and children's) and availability. Wartella et al. (1990) reported that entertainment programs constituted the bulk of children's programming available in video rental facilities. Cable television also increases availability of children's programs because it supplies Nickolodeon. Some families also received the Disney and Discovery channels. Although some of the programs on these stations are informative, many of them are designed primarily for entertainment.

Children's daily schedules also limit the times they have available to watch broadcast television. The majority of child informative programs are on weekdays when many children who might benefit from watching them are away from home in childcare centers. Previous studies have also found that children in fulltime childcare watch relatively little child informative

programming because of scheduling conflicts (Pinon, Huston, & Wright 1989).

Virtually all surveys of television use show that low income and education is associated with high television use. This sample was no exception. These differences are partly due to the lack of viable alternatives for people with limited incomes. Poor parents often do not have the financial resources to provide their children with alternative activities, such as outings, art or music lessons. Their neighborhoods are often unsafe for children to play outside. For them, television provides a safe, cheap, and effortless source of entertainment.

What these data add to the literature is the fact that differences among income groups occur primarily for time spent viewing adult programs. Adults in low income families watch more television than those in high income families; hence, their children are exposed to more hours of programming designed for adults.

Family structure and the demands of other activities are important contributors to the amounts and kinds of television children watch. Children in large families and in single-parent families are especially heavy viewers. Younger and older siblings exert influence over what children watch. Time schedules, such as preschool attendance, set some boundaries on when television can be viewed. The nature of programs viewed by children are determined by their age, the number and age of their siblings, the television options available in their homes, and by the broadcast industry.

Table 1

Total Hours of Television and VCR Viewed Per Week

	2-year-olds Mean	4-year-olds Mean	T
Total Viewing	25.5	22.5	
Total TV Viewing	21.1	19.0	
Child Informative	1.6	1.2	
Child Entertainment	6.5	7.3	
Adult Programs	10.6	8.1	
Unclassified	2.4	2.4	
Total VCR Viewing	4.3	3.6	
Child Informative	.2	.1	
Child Entertainment	2.7	2.6	
Adult Programs	1.0	.8	
Unclassified	.4	.1	
	N=42	N=47	

Table 2

Total Hours of Television and VCR Viewed Per Week By Income

	< $10,000 Mean	$10,000 - $20,000 Mean	>
Total Viewing	29.0	22.6	
Total TV Viewing	25.5	18.5	
Child Informative	1.3	1.7	
Child Entertainment	7.8	6.3	
Adult Programs	13.1	8.1	
Unclassified	3.3	2.4	
Total VCR Viewing	3.5	4.1	
Child Informative	.3	.04	
Child Entertainment	2.0	2.9	
Adult Programs	.9	.9	
Unclassified	.3	.3	
	N=37	N=37	

Table 3

Total Hours of Television and VCR Viewed Per Week By Type of Childcare

	No Childcare Mean	Family Childcare Mean	Child
Total Viewing	28.8	22.0	
Total TV Viewing	24.3	19.4	
Child Informative	2.2	.9	
Child Entertainment	6.5	6.0	
Adult Programs	11.5	10.2	
Unclassified	4.1	2.3	
Total VCR Viewing	4.5	2.6	
Child Informative	.3	.0	
Child Entertainment	2.5	1.8	
Adult Programs	1.5	.8	
Unclassified	.2	.0	
	N=29	N=15	N=45

Percentage of Children's Weekly Viewing By Media Option

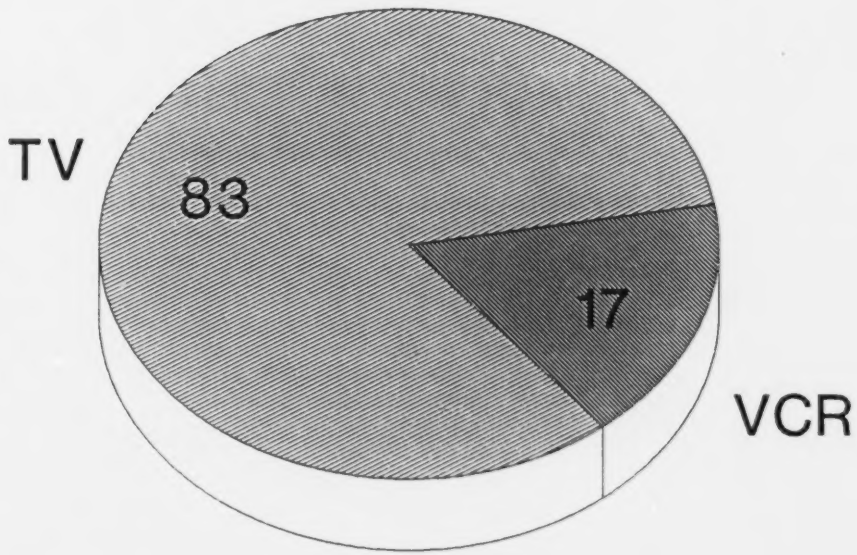

Figure 1

Percentage of Weekly Viewing Devoted to Program Type and Media Option

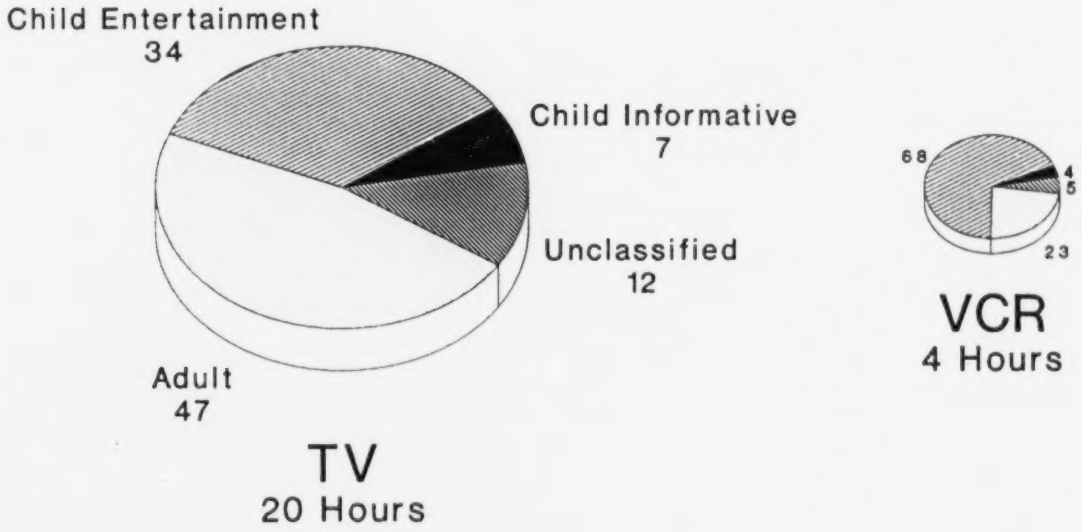

Figure 2

Weekly Hours of Viewing by Program Category and VCR Ownership

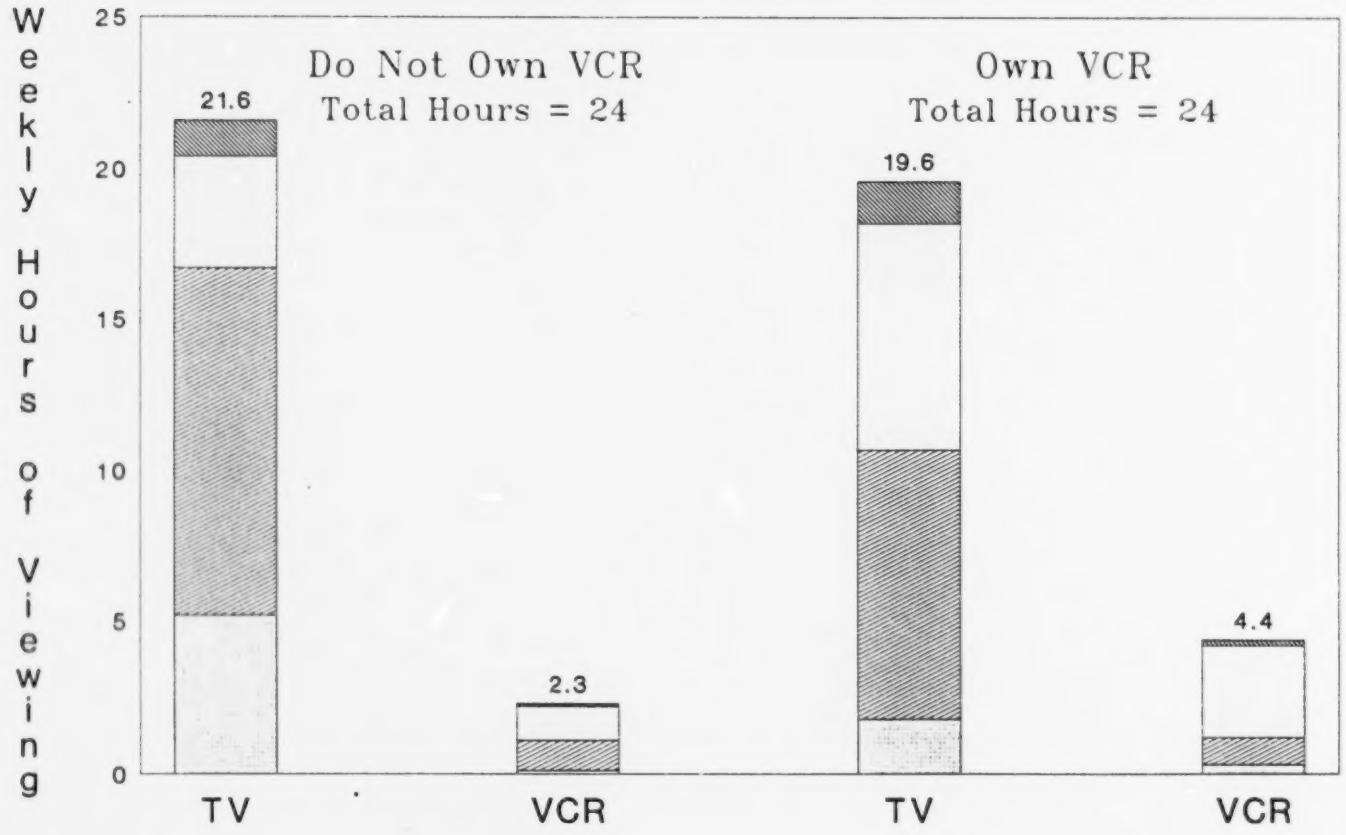

Figure 3

Weekly Hours of Viewing by Program Category and Cable Subscription

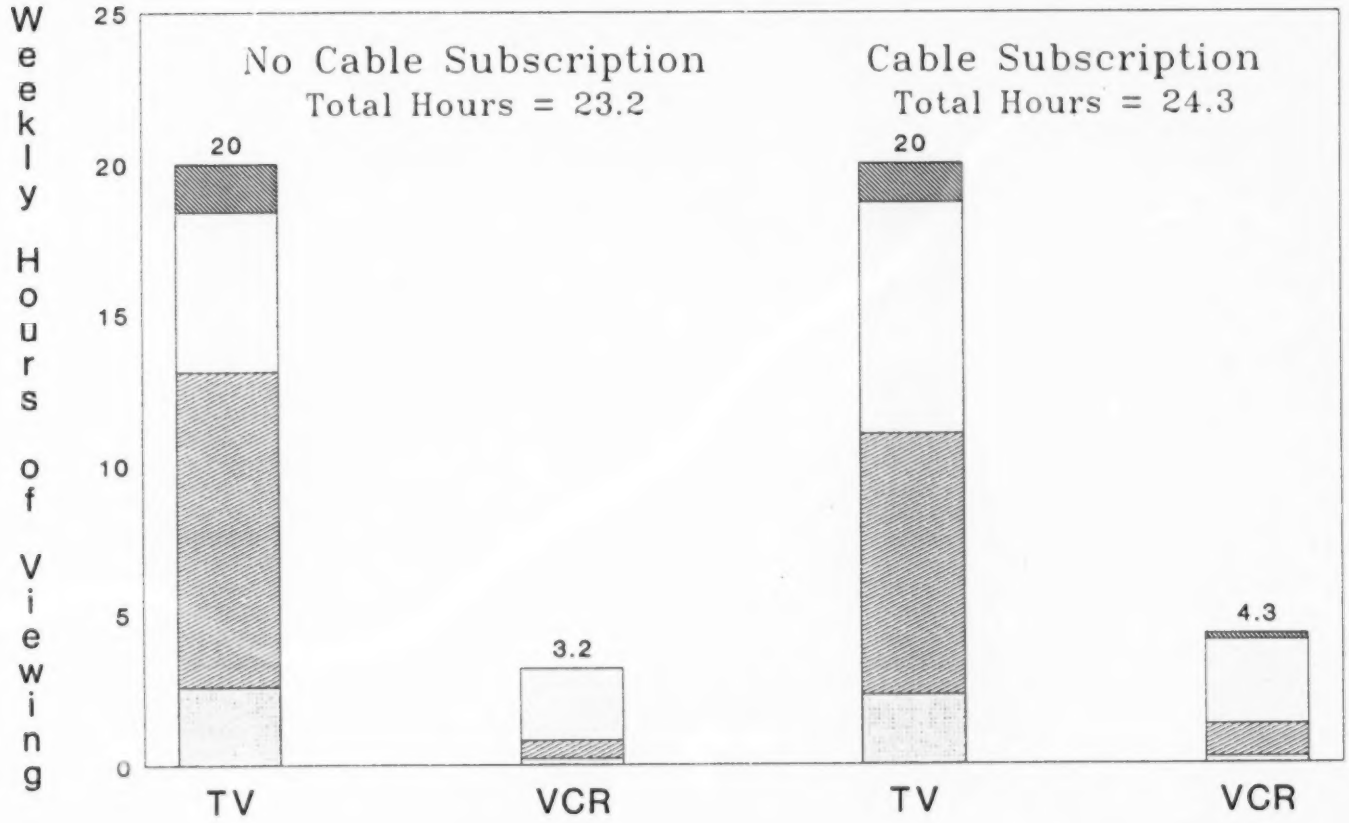

Figure 4

Weekly Hours of Viewing the Media by Program Category and Income

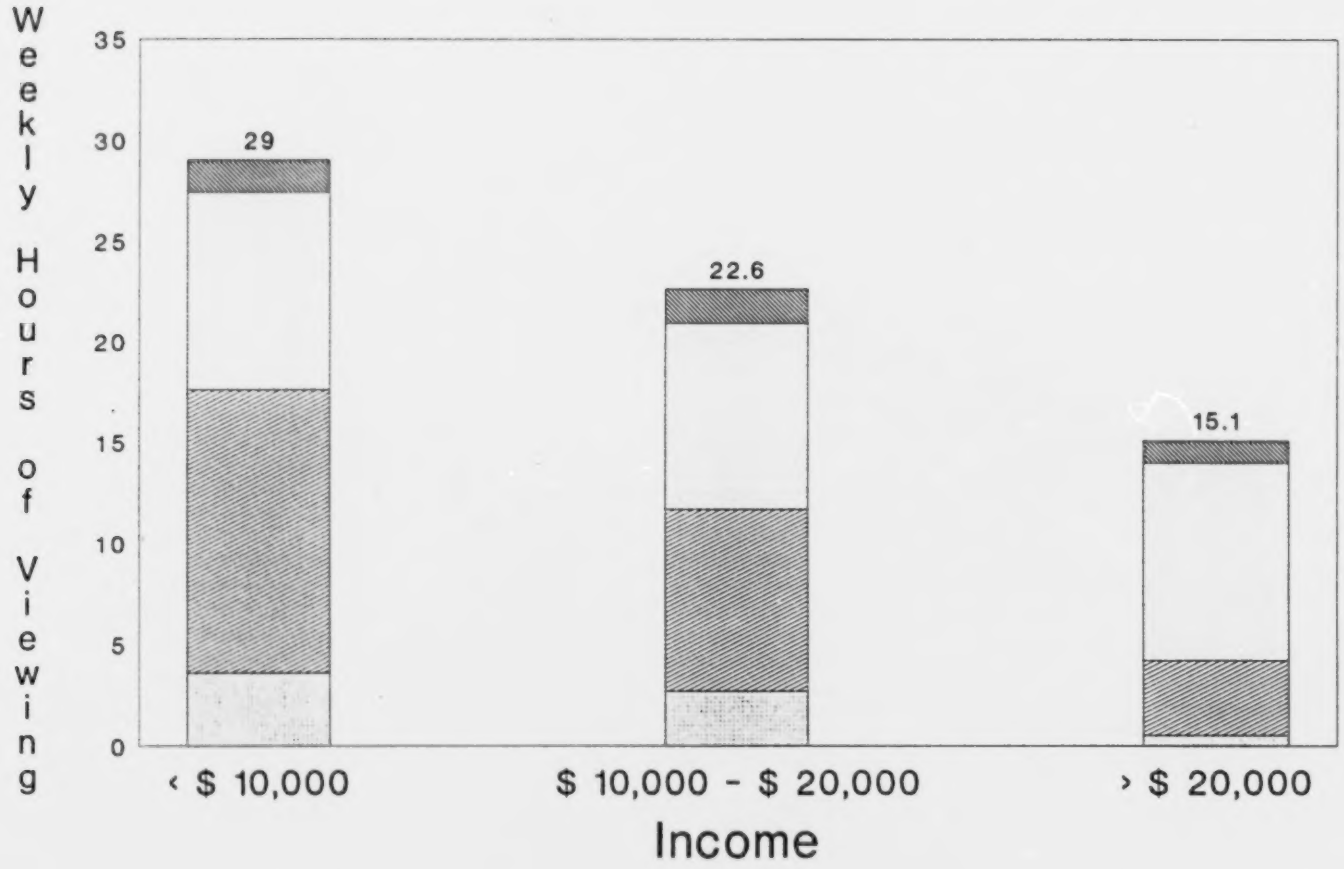

Figure 5

Weekly Hours of Viewing the Media By Program Category

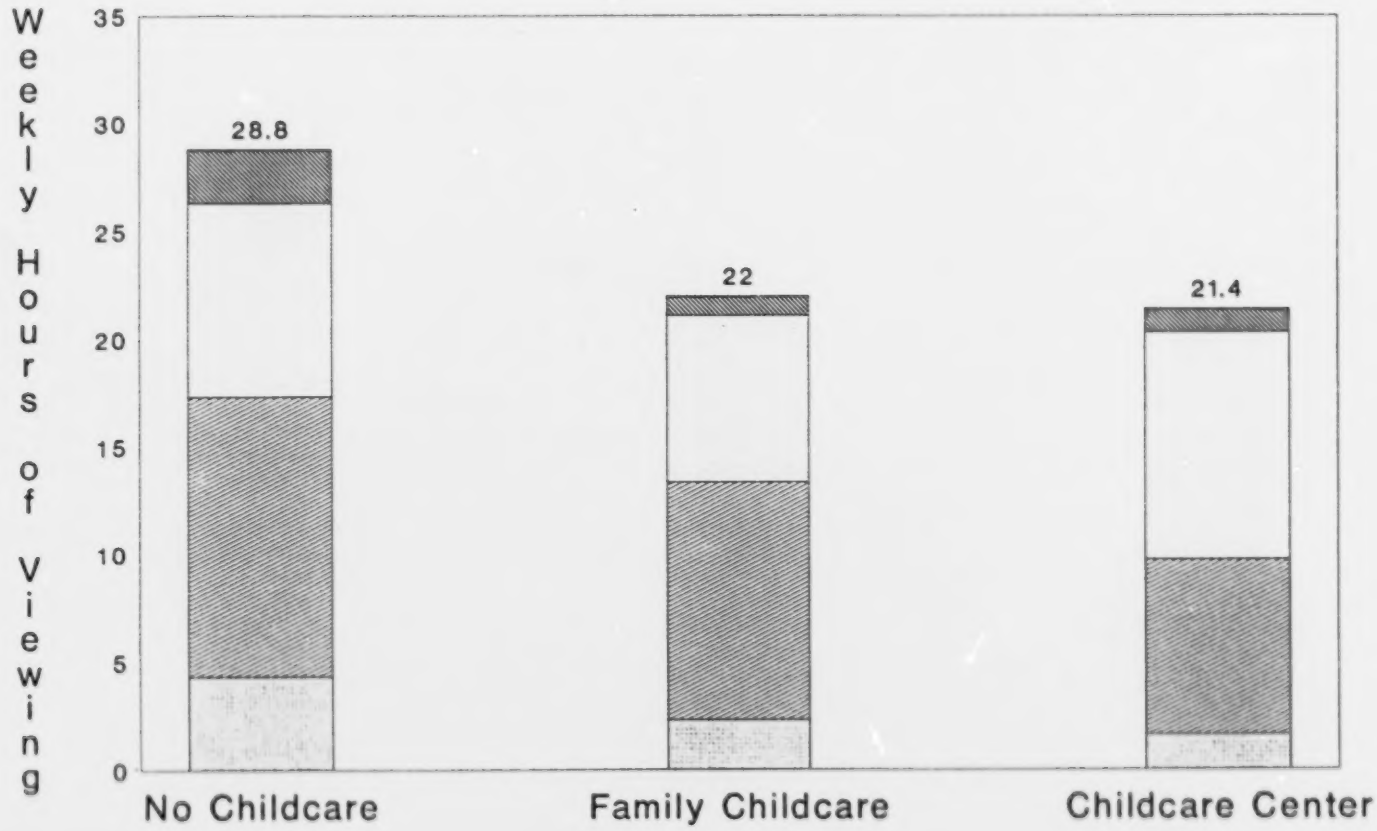

Figure 6

References

Anderson, D. R., & Bryant, J. (1983). Research on children's television viewing: The state of the art. In J. Bryant & D. R. Anderson (Eds), Children Understanding of Television (pp. 331-353), New York; Academic Press.

Brown, J. D., Childers, K. W., Bauman, K. E., & Koch, G. G. (1990). The influence of new media and family structure on young adolescents' television and radio use. Communication Research, 17(1), 65-82.

Comstock, G. (1989). The evaluation of American television. New Bury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Condry, J. (1989). The psychology of television. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Congressional Budget Office. (1988). Trends in family income: 1970-1988. Washington DC: author.

Gunter, B., & Svennevig, M. (1987). Behind and in front of the screen: Television's involvement with family life. London: John Libbey & Co..

Huston, A. C., Wright, J. C., Rice, M. R., Kerkman, D. D., & St. Peters, M. (1990). The development of television viewing patterns in early childhood: A longitudinal investigation. Developmental Psychology, 26, 409-420.

Kerkman, D. D., Kunkel,D., Huston, A. C., Wright, J. C., & Pinon, M. F. (1990). Children's television programming and the "free market solution". Journalism Quarterly, 67(1), 147-156.

Medrich, E. A., Roizen, J., Rubin, V., & Buckley, S. (1982). The serious business of growing up: A study of children's lives

outside school. Berkley, California: University of California Press.

Nielsen Report on Television (1989). Northbrook, Il: A. C. Nielsen Co.

Nielsen Report on Television (1990). Northbrook, Il: A. C. Nielsen Co.

Pinon, M., Huston, A. C., & Wright, J. C. (1989). Family ecology and child characteristics that predict young children's educational television viewing. Child Development, 60(4), 846-856.

Sarlo, G., Jason, L. A., & Lonack, C. (1988). Parents' strategies for limiting children's television watching. Psychological Reports, 63, 435-438.

Wartella, A., Heintz, K. E., Aidman, A. J., & Mazzarella, S. R. (1990). Television and beyond: Children's video media in one community. Communication Research, 17(1), 45-64.

Watkins, B. (1985). Television viewing as a dominant activity of childhood: A developmental theory of television effects. Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 2, 323-337.